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# Engagement of Kindergarten English Learners during the Dramatic Play Center

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ENGAGEMENT OF KINDERGARTEN ENGLISH LEARNERS DURING THE

DRAMATIC PLAY CENTER

by

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**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

I believe that one of the best ways teachers can support their students' learning is to reflect on what is working and not working for their students. Many of the kindergarten English Learners (ELs) I have worked with in the past have met or exceeded the end of year literacy benchmarks that my school district has set in place. However, I have noticed a pattern that some kindergarten ELs who have lower English language oral language proficiency skills have not always been making the end of the year literacy benchmark goals. It appears to me that the vocabulary and structure of the language used in the books that kindergarten students are expected to independently read by the end of the year are more complex than the students' oral language skills. I believe there is a great need to provide more opportunities for students to practice and develop their English oral language skills.

As a teacher of ELs I began to ask myself what can I do to help support and build more opportunities for students to practice their English oral language skills in meaningful yet fun ways. Research shows that students learn the most when they are engaged in learning (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Jensen, 2005; Woolfolk, 2001). If teachers know that supporting oral language development skills helps kindergarten ELs reach the end of the year literacy benchmarks scores and the research says that students learn more when they are engaged in learning then teachers need to find more ways to create an environment that fosters engagement in oral language development skills.

This chapter introduces the following topics: engaged learners, the importance of engagement, fostering engaged learners, my background and perspectives on language and learning, and my role as the researcher. The chapter concludes with the question that will guide my study and a preview of what is to come in the following chapters.

**Engaged Learners**

From a young age students need to learn both content and early literacy skills. When the students I work with are truly engaged in learning I see them: listening and paying attention to others, making eye contact with the speaker object being talked about, using tools in the correct way, expressing thoughtful ideas, asking questions, sharing opinions, using self-regulatory strategies, exhibiting confidence, actively participating in team-based work, and using humor in a positive way. As teacher I am extra motivated and excited about teaching when I see the passion and energy these young students have for learning. It is my goal to have all of the students I work with engaged all the time. However, the reality is there are times when the students I work with appear to not be engaged in learning. I have noticed that the ELs I work with seem most engaged when they are involved in hands on learning activities that allow for student choice.

The dramatic play center is a place where I have observed students engaged in learning even when they may have difficulties engaging in learning at other times of the school day.  My goal through this study is to see if I can find patterns in what different kindergarten ELs find engaging during the dramatic play center. This chapter introduces my central question: *To what extent do different activities within the dramatic play center engage ELs?*

**The Importance of Engagement**

In order for learning to occur it is essential for students to be engaged. I believe that the more engaged a student is the more likely learning is taking place. When trying to measure engagement, an observer must look for engaged learning behaviors. Engaged students are learners who frequently and consistently exhibit positive emotions and behaviors during learning activities, are intrinsically motivated, have a positive self-esteem, are able to think for themselves as well as take on another person's perspective, follow the directions and procedures, stay on task, complete quality work, and tend to view academic activities with excitement (Jones, 2009; Marzano, 2007; McGary-Klose, 2008; Reeve; 2012; Wehlage et al., 1989; Woolfolk, 2001; Zmuda, 2008).  I feel most confident that my students are learning when I observe my students exhibit all or most of these behaviors.

**Fostering Engaged Learners**

As a teacher I believe it is my job to foster engaged learners. I primarily try to accomplish this by setting up activities within the classroom that elicit the engagement of my students.  Knowing what kinds of activities to set up that would help foster engagement relies heavily on being a keen observer of students. A teacher must have an understanding of what kinds of activities brings out an individual student's desire to stay on task, complete quality work, and view academic activities with excitement.

**My Background and Perspectives**

Since August of 2012, I have been a full-time teacher of ELs at a large elementary school in a suburban area in the Midwest. In the four years that I have been at this school our ELL program model has changed from mostly a pull-out model to primarily a co-

teaching model. Currently, most of my time is spent co-teaching in kindergarten

classrooms during the literacy block time. Although I have been working with

kindergarten ELs since I got my license in early 2011, I have worked with young ELs

since 2008. While I was working on obtaining my teaching license I spent two years

volunteering in a preschool classroom as an AmeriCorps volunteer. It was during these

years as an AmeriCorps volunteer that I discovered my passion for working in early

childhood classrooms. I also saw firsthand how students, especially ELs, were able to

effectively develop oral language through play in a dramatic play center.

### My Role as the Researcher

My role in conducting this research was to analyze student engagement while

students were participating in the dramatic play center in order to plan activities within

the dramatic play center that would continue to pique students' interest and engage them

in using the English oral language skills in new and different ways.  I believe that

dramatic play centers should be included in every kindergarten classroom because play is

an essential part of learning for young students. It appears that I am not the only teacher

who feels that play has an important place in the early elementary school classroom. Rich

(2015) writes in the Minneapolis Star Tribune that the dramatic play center is making a

return to classrooms across the state of Minnesota. However, as more time is set aside for

play it is important to look at how play centers can be setup to make play meaningful and

purposeful work, yet still be engaging to young learners.

Like all researchers, I recognize that I see the world through a lens that is shaped

by my background and biases. In this study I will be a researcher in the form of an

ethnographer. Brice-Heath (1986) describes an ethnographer as a researcher who both

observes and participates in the lives of the people he or she is studying. I find it important to clearly express some of my ideas and beliefs because I know that as the researcher, observer, and participant in this study my beliefs and ideas will have an influence on the findings.

I believe that play is an important part in child development especially when it comes to language development. I also believe that the dramatic play center has an important place in the early childhood classroom. In addition, I think that the dramatic play center has not been fully utilized by teachers as a tool to help students develop oral language skills.

## Guiding Question

My research for this project answered the following question: *To what extent do different activities within the dramatic play center engage ELs?*

## Chapter Overviews

In this chapter, I gave rationale for why I completed this research. I also discussed what I have observed about student engagement of kindergarten ELs. In addition, I discussed my background and perspective on language and learning, and my role as the researcher. I also presented my research question. In the following chapter I will review relevant literature that has helped me frame the topics surrounding my research. In Chapter Three, I will present my research methodology as well as explain how my research fits within the mixed research paradigm. In Chapter Four, I will summarize the results of my research. Finally, Chapter Five will be a summary of my findings from this study. In this final chapter I also discuss the limitations of the study, implications for further research and recommendations for educators of young ELs.

**CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of this study is to observe what aspects of the dramatic play center a small group of kindergarten ELs find most engaging and how teachers can build upon what these students find engaging. In the kindergarten classrooms where I co-teach, there are a few kindergarten ELs who often display disengaged learning behaviors during large group learning activities. However, I have noticed that these students are most engaged when they are involved with hands-on activities where they are able to make their own choices. I have noticed that most students seem to be engaged during small group center time while involved with hands-on activities.

Through this action research I wanted to observe what if any aspects of small group dramatic play are engaging to these sometimes difficult to engage learners. The essential question guiding my research is: *To what extent do different activities within the dramatic play center engage ELs?*

This chapter starts out with a report on the current population of ELs in the United States and in Minnesota, where this research takes place. I define student engagement and take a close look at the different domains of engagement. I look at the research that explains the importance of engagement in learning. I present research that looks at how drama can be incorporated into the classroom to create an environment that fosters student engagement as well as examine current best practices for dramatic play centers in

the early childhood classroom. Finally, I present a gap in the research and my research question for this study.

## English Learners

The number of ELs continues to grow in the United States of America. In 2004, 20 million children (28% of all children in the USA) were living in households where a language other than English was spoken. In 2013, 23 million children (32% of all children in the United States of America) were living in households where a language other than English was spoken (Child Trends Data Bank, 2014).

Minnesota's EL population follows a similar trend to that seen nationally. In October of 2015 there were approximately 71,000 students in Minnesota enrolled in EL services compared to just over 59,000 students who were enrolled in EL services in 2006 (Minnesota Department of Education). With ELs making up a sizeable portion of the student population in Minnesota and across the nation, it brings a heightened awareness to the importance of teachers taking time to reflect and think about how they are specifically setting up an environment that engages and supports ELs.

## Student Engagement

What does engaged student learning look like? Engaged students are learners who frequently and consistently exhibit positive emotions and behaviors during learning activities, are intrinsically motivated, have positive self-esteem, are able to think for themselves as well as take on another person's perspective, follow the directions and procedures, stay on task, complete quality work, and tend to view academic activities with excitement (Jones, 2009; Marzano, 2007; McGary-Klose, 2008; Reeve, 2012; Wehlage et al., 1989; Woolfolk, 2001; Zmuda, 2008). According to brain-based learning

expert, Eric Jensen (2005), engaged learners are simultaneously able to focus their sight, pitch their ears, and physically attend to the activity at hand.

Motivation and engagement are especially important when it comes to promoting skill improvement and language learning achievement (Dörnyei, 1994; Lin, 2012; Meltzer & Hamman, 2004). When it comes to learning a second language a student not only has to be engaged with learning a new communication code and the grammar rules and vocabulary that come along with a new language, a student has to learn a new culture that comes along with a new language (Dörnyei, 2001; Gardner, 1979).

Williams (1994) states:

The learning of a foreign language involves far more than simply learning skills, or a system of rules, or a grammar; it involves an alteration in self-image, the adoption of new social and cultural behaviors and ways of being, and therefore has a significant impact on the social nature of the learner. (p. 77)

Language learning not only involves being engaged academically, but also involves being engaged socially. Research shows that engagement is a key part of language learning and success at school, but what does the research tell us about why ELs may have difficulties with engagement at school?

**Elements for Engaging Students**

Educational researchers have identified a variety of reasons why students may be disengaged with learning at school (Law & Eckes, 2000; Marzano, 2007; McGary-Klose, 2008; Nessel & Graham, 2007; Woolfolk, 2001; Zmuda, 2008 ). Researchers have found seven factors that influence student engagement:

1. Student misperceptions about learning & themselves.

2. Lack of student interest and choice in lessons.

3. Limited learning strategies

4. Negotiation identity & culture

5. Peer influence.

6. Student mobility.

7. Family and home life.

This research regarding student engagement is not specific to ELs, however since it is general to all learners we can assume that much of this information does apply to ELs.

**Student misperceptions about learning.** Zmuda (2008) believes that disengagement stems from misconceptions students have about learning. Zmuda identifies nine different misconceptions that students have that often lead to disengaged learning:

1. The rules of the classroom and content are based on what the teachers want.

2. What the teacher wants me to say is more important than what I want to say.

3. The point of an assignment is to get it done.

4. Once an assigned is finished, I don't have to think about it anymore.

5. If I make a mistake, my job is to replace it with the correct answer.

6. I only feel proud of my work when I get a good grade.

7. Speeding through an assignment shows that I am smart.

8. If I get too far behind, I cannot catch up.

9. What I'm learning in school doesn't have anything to do with my life.

Students who hold these beliefs tend to see learning as something external and

meaningless to their lives. These students tend to quickly lose any motivation that they do have for learning and feel overwhelmed by all the tasks they are asked to do at school.

**Lack of student interest and choice in lessons.** Students may have difficulties with engaging in learning that they may not be interested or see meaning in the topics being discussed. Students need to be able to see the meaning in the work they are doing (McGary-Klose, 2008; Woolfolk, 2001; Zmuda, 2008). Teachers who design lessons that are appealing and content relevant to their students help students buy into learning (Jensen, 2005; Marzano 2007; Wiggins and McTighe, 2006). Students who see their work as worthwhile and meaningful are better able to recall what they have learned (Jensen, 2005).

**Limited learning strategies.** Higher order thinking skills are a critical component to success at school. Students need to be able to think at different levels, for different purposes, and in different contexts (Nessel & Graham, 2007). Students who can use higher order thinking skills to interact with content are much more engaged in their learning (McGary-Klose, 2008; Woolfolk, 2001). Students may be motivated to learn, but if they don't have higher order thinking skills in place for use across a variety of different contexts and purposes they will only be engaged in learning up to a certain extent.

**Negotiating identity and culture.** For some students the culture they experience at home and school is very different. This is often especially true for ELs. For many ELs their cultural identity is not one culture or the other, it is a blend of the culture which they live in at school and out in their community and their home culture (Woolfolk, 2001). This discontinuity between home and school culture can have a negative impact on

academic achievement because students whose home and school culture are radically different have to spend time learning how to operate under a different set of social rules. (Lovelace & Wheeler, 2006).

**Peer influence.** Academic achievement and engagement are influenced by a student's peers. Peers influence each other in both positive and negative ways. Having poor quality friendships and perceiving that classmates do not care about success in school is related to having low student engagement (Nelson & Debacker, 2008).

**Student mobility.** Student mobility is another factor that influences student engagement. Often students who move frequently feel less connected with school and are consequentially less engaged with learning (Sanderson, 2000). Also, often when students move frequently it takes time for their school records to get to their new school. This can result in delays for students in getting needed services such as ESL (Freeman & Freeman, 1998). Without the support students need, students can quickly become overwhelmed and discouraged with school leading to disengaged learning.

**Family and home life.** Students' home life can greatly influence how much they are engaged in school. When parents/guardians set high academic expectations, students more often than not rise to meet the challenge. Students who are given high academic expectations perform at higher levels than students who are not given these high expectations by their parents (Woolfolk, 2001).

The research shows that there are many factors that influence a student's ability to engage at school, but what can teachers of kindergarten ELs do to make school more engaging to students who often display disengaged learning behaviors? Perhaps looking closely at the different domains of engagement might provide us with insight into how

teachers can best create a learning environment that is engaging to these often difficult to engage EL kindergarten students. Perhaps through looking at the domains of engagement we will come to a clearer understanding of why some EL kindergarteners have such a difficult time engaging in classroom activities.

**The Domains of Engagement**

There are three domains or types of engagement: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Lippan & Rivers, 2008; Parsons, Nuland, & Parson, 2014). Behavioral engagement deals with participation, student conduct, and on-task behaviors (Karweit, 1989; Peterson, Swing, Stark, & Wass, 1984). Behavioral engagement entails positive conduct, following rules, adhering to classroom norms, and displaying behaviors such as effort, persistence, concentration and contribution to discussion (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Finn, Pannozzo, & Voelkl, 1995).

Emotional engagement entails a student's affective reactions towards school and learning. How students feels while they are at school, or their like or dislike of a teacher or an activity is all part of emotional engagement. Emotional engagement is driven by relationships, including relationships with teachers and peers and having an overall feeling of a sense of belonging (Fredricks et al., 2004; Lippman & Rivers, 2008).

Cognitive engagement entails a student's ability to self-regulate (Fredirecks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Cognitive engagement has been described as a student's desire to go beyond the requirement and take on a challenge (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Newmann et al., 1992; Wehlage et al., 1989). Researchers have defined cognitive engagement as a student's ability to use metacognitive strategies to plan, monitor, and

evaluate cognition when completing task (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Zimmerman, 1990).

All three of the domains work together and influence each other when it comes to student engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). When observing an EL student's engagement one must look at all three domains of engagement in order to gain a more detailed understanding of what is engaging to the student. For example, an EL student might display signs of behavioral engagement, but not display as many signs of engagement when it comes to cognitive or emotional engagement (Law & Eckes, 2000).

**Importance of Student Engagement**

Why spend time researching and reflecting on student engagement? First of all, student engagement is a sign that students are processing and understanding new material. Students displaying higher order thinking skills is a sign that students are actively engaged in learning, processing and retaining information (Lorain, 2010). Secondly, students who have higher levels of school engagement tend to have higher academic achievement, lower dropout rates, and engage in less risky behaviors outside of school (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2007; Finn & Rock, 1997; Fredricks et al., 2004; Lippman & Rivas, 2008; Marks, 2000). Additionally, student engagement has been linked to students having a positive self-concept, a strong internal locus of control, and possessing a higher rate of resiliency (Jensen, 2005).

Reflecting upon and striving for student engagement is necessary for teachers. Most states, including Minnesota where this study takes place, have engaging students as part of their professional development standards (Revisor of Statues, State of Minnesota,

2016). Teachers must continually ask what they can do to help setup an environment that fosters student engagement and how they can measure student engagement.

**Measuring Student Engagement**

Jones (2009) and Reeve (2012) found that student engagement is best measured using a checklist to record observed students engaged learning behaviors and documenting students' feelings towards learning. Jones breaks down student engagement into five different observable behavior characteristics: positive body language, consistent focus, verbal participation, student confidence, and fun and excitement. In addition to observing student behaviors as a measurement of student engagement Jones believes that when trying to measure student engagement researchers need to have conversation with the students around each of the different aspects of engagement: individual attention, clarity of learning, meaningfulness of work, rigorous thinking, and performance orientation. If teachers know that student engagement is key to success at school and teachers have an idea on how to measure student engagement then what can teachers do to create an environment that fosters student engagement?

**Fostering Student Engagement through Drama**

According to Jablon and Wilkinson (2006), drama can be used to help facilitate student engagement. Drama is a great way to facilitate engagement because it exposes children to new information, promotes excitement through discovery, activates prior knowledge, requires active investigation, encourages collaboration, and allows for choice (Jabolon & Wilkinson, 2006).

The dramatic play center is one way educators can incorporate drama into the early childhood classroom in order to help create an environment that fosters student

engagement. While at the dramatic play center a small group of children may engage in acting out or retelling a story, dressing up, or engaging in role-playing activities. Cynthia Leigh Reyes (2010), a kindergarten teacher in Fort Worth, Texas, explains that she uses the dramatic play center along with other centers "to engage children who were off-task and those who finished their work early" (p.95). Center based learning like the dramatic play center has been found to be an engaging form of learning for young learners because it provides them with an opportunity to focus on an activity that mixes play with a meaningful learning experience. The research done by Perlmutter and Burrell (1995) found, "playful learning balanced by purposeful activities means more engaged learners and fewer behavior problems" (p.19). The dramatic play center can offer kindergarten ELs an opportunity to engage in playful learning that also helps them practice foundational pre-literacy skills.

## The Dramatic Play Center

What does the dramatic play center include and look like in an early childhood classroom? When looking into best practices for setting up a dramatic play center in the early childhood classroom there are a multitude of aspects teachers should think about. In the next sections the following will be discussed: what types of materials or props should be included in a dramatic play center, how to deliberately setup the dramatic play center so that it connects to stories that students are familiar with, and finally what the role of the teacher is during the time students are in the dramatic play center.

### Materials/Props

Careful and intentional choice of which props and materials to include at the dramatic play center provides students with an opportunity to use language that they

might not otherwise use, and also provides them with a familiar and fun environment in which to practice and use the language. Huber (2000) gives the example of having a kitchen as the dramatic play center setting (a familiar environment to most students), but then having different food items that students may or may not be familiar with. The familiar environment of the kitchen gives students the comfort of knowing how they should act, but the unfamiliar food items provide students with an opportunity to take on new vocabulary.

Having students engage in making simple props not only gives students the opportunity to become familiar with unfamiliar vocabulary, it also provides students with an opportunity to start thinking and planning for how they might use these props to create or recreate a story. Also, the process of making props may introduce some children to the process of symbolic representation, a skill needed for literacy development. For example, through the process of creating and using props a student might learn that a box can be a car during dramatic play or a mask can represent a character from a favorite story. This knowledge of symbolic representation is an essential literacy skill as students learn that stories can be represented through drawings, and letters represent sounds, which form words, which form stories (Chakraborty & Stone, 2009).

**Story Dramatization during Dramatic Play**

Studies have shown that the way teachers set up a dramatic play center can affect the topic, quality, and amount of oral language produced by students during their time at the dramatic play center and thus affect students' engagement levels (Rowe 2000; Stewig 1982; Williamson & Silvern 1991). Studies have shown that dramatic play centered on story dramatization (when students reenact a story or poem) encourage students to

produce high levels of oral language needed for comprehending, discussing and engaging with literature (Christie, 1987; Dansky 1980; Galda, 1984; Guttman & Frederiksen, 1985; Pellegrini & Galda, 1982; Silvern, Taylor, Williamson, Surbeck, & Kelley, 1986; Stewig, 1982; Williamson & Silvern 1991).  Dramatic play focused on story dramatization helps young students engage in discussing literature by encouraging symbolic play and meta-communication (Chakraborty & Sandra, 2009; Christie, 1987; Williamson & Silvern, 1991).

Another way the dramatic play center helps students engage in discussing literature is through the development of meta-communication. Meta-communication during the dramatic play center takes place when students have a conversation about how the story is going to be converted into voice gestures and body movements (Williamson & Silvern, 1991). When having a conversation around how to recreate a story during the dramatic play center it is necessary for students to have a greater comprehension of stories, psychologically connect to characters, authentically sequence events, and retell stories. These are skills that require high levels of oral language and are useful skills for literacy comprehension (Chakraborty & Sandra, 2009). Practicing meta-communication and symbolic transformation during dramatic play gives students the opportunity to not only engage with language, but also helps build foundational literacy skills.

**The Role of the Teacher during Dramatic Play**

In many cases teachers have limited opportunities to engage with students during dramatic play, as dramatic play is often done as a center activity and the teacher is most likely busy moving about the room or instructing small group lessons.  However, in

instances where the teacher does have an opportunity to engage with children during dramatic play the research is mixed on what the role of the teacher should be.

Bruner (1983) and Mourão (2014) suggest that adults should engage with students in play as they can be great language role models. Other studies' findings suggest that teachers should limit how much they engage with children while the students are at the dramatic play center (Chakraborty & Sandra, 2009; Logue & Detour, 2011). Chakraborty and Sandra (2009) state, "The teacher's role is to provide opportunities, time, and materials for play to unfold, but play must never be an assignment with objectives" (p. 96G). When students are given an open opportunity to play freely the play becomes more imaginative and students are allowed to practice symbolic play. Logue and Detour (2011) found that children's pretend play becomes more complex when teachers support play through setup but do not direct it.

## Gap in the Research

Previous research shows that student engagement is key to student success in school (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2007; Finn & Rock, 1997; Fredricks et al., 2004; Jones, 2009; Lippman & Rivas, 2008; Lorrain, 2010; Marks, 2000; Marzano, 2007; McGary-Klose, 2008; Reeve; 2012; Woolfolk, 2001; Zmuda, 2008).  However, research has also shown that schools are not all successful in engaging students, especially ELs (Marks, 2000; McDermott, Mordell & Stolzfus, 2001). Therefore it appears that further research regarding what teachers can do improve student engagement at school is needed. Additionally, the majority of research looked at school engagement at the middle school and secondary level.

This lack of research on student engagement at the early childhood level and with ELs leaves teachers of ELs in preschool and kindergarten wondering what they can do to improve student engagement. Although some teachers in early childhood classrooms are the use of drama in the dramatic play center one way they have been able to increase student engagement levels with these young EL learners, it still leaves questions about how teachers differentiate the dramatic play center to make it more engaging to EL kindergarten students. (Jabolon & Wilkinson, 2006; Perlmutter & Burrell, 1995; Reyes, 2010).

**Research Question**

Through this research I explored how to setup and enrich a dramatic play center in order to increase student engagement, especially when it comes to ELs who are already displaying behaviors that point toward disengaged learning in the whole group setting. This study was conducted in a kindergarten classroom with the hope that the observations and results would benefit classroom teachers as well as EL teachers when it comes to planning how they can best engage ELs through dramatic play. Through this action research I wanted to observe what if any aspects of small group dramatic play are engaging to these sometimes difficult to engage learners. The essential question guiding my research is: *To what extent do different activities within the dramatic play center engage ELs?*

**Summary**

As the EL student population in the Unites States continues to grow it is imperative that educators think and reflect on how they can best create and support an environment that fosters engaged learning for ELs. An environment that fosters engaged

learning is key for ELs as language learning requires both academic and social

engagement opportunities (Dörnyei, 2001; Gardner, 1979; Williams, 1994). Engaged ELs

are learners who frequently and consistently exhibit positive emotions and behaviors

during learning activities, are intrinsically motivated, have positive self-esteem, are able

to think for themselves as well as take on another person's perspective, follow the

directions and procedures, stay on task, complete quality work, and tend to view

academic activities with excitement (Jones, 2009; Marzano, 2007; McGary-Klose, 2008;

Reeve; 2012; Woolfolk, 2001; Zmuda, 2008).

There are several factors that influence student engagement. Researchers have

found seven factors that influence student engagement including: student misperceptions

about learning and themselves, lack of student interest and choice in lessons, limited

learning strategies, negotiation identity and culture, peer influence, student mobility, and

family and home life.

Engaged learning is best measured by using checklists and student interviews

(Jones, 2009; Reeve, 2012). Checklists can be used to record students' behaviors and

used to see if there is a pattern of engaged learning behaviors. Student interviews can

help educators better understand what is motivating and engaging to students.

Drama is a great way to facilitate engagement because it exposes children to new

information, promotes excitement through discovery, activates prior knowledge, requires

active investigation, encourages collaboration, and allows for choice (Jabolon &

Wilkinson, 2006). Careful and intentional choice of which props and materials to include

at the dramatic play center provides students with an opportunity to use language that

they might not otherwise use, but provides them with a familiar and fun environment in

which to practice and use the language. Teachers should also think carefully about how they are involved in both the setup and the actual activity of dramatic play.

This chapter concludes with looking at what gaps remain in the research around engagement of kindergarten ELs. In the next chapter I present my intention and rationale to further my research and learning about to the extent to which different activities within the dramatic play center engage ELs.

**CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**


This purpose of this study was to investigate what makes a dramatic play center engaging to kindergarten ELs in a mainstream classroom in a suburban elementary school in the Midwest. I looked specifically at the behaviors of three ELs who often display disengaged learning behaviors during whole group learning to see if there were any components of a dramatic play center they found engaging and to find ways that I, a teacher could make the dramatic play center more engaging for these students. In this study, I used an action research method to explore how to improve a dramatic play center to be more engaging to three kindergarten ELs who often display behaviors of disengaged learning.

Throughout the course of this action research study, I used four different data collection techniques in order to document my thoughts, record observations of students, and collect the thoughts and feelings of the students about their time in the dramatic play center. First of all, observational data in the form of a daily research journal was completed by me as a place to capture thinking regarding planning for the dramatic play center and as a place to document my thoughts and feelings about how I had setup the dramatic play center in the hopes of increasing student engagement. Secondly, a specific checklist was used to record and track student engagement behaviors as observed from watching video recordings of students during their time at the dramatic play center. Finally, student interviews were conducted before, during, and after the action research

study to find out students' thoughts and feelings towards their time spent at the dramatic play center. I used these three different data collection techniques to attempt to answer the question driving my research: *To what extent do different activities within the dramatic play center engage ELs?*

## Overview of the Chapter

This chapter discusses the methodology used for the research. It begins with a discussion of the research paradigm and why I chose to use a qualitative approach of action research. Second, research participants and location are discussed. The specific data collection protocols of anecdotal planning data and a teaching journal, observational records from videotaping, and student interviews/surveys used in this study are explained more in depth. How I analyzed and verified the data from the study will also be addressed. Finally, this chapter concludes by discussing the ethics of the research in relation to using human subjects and the dual role of teacher and researcher in action research.

## Research Paradigm

This study uses a mixed methods approach to research with an emphasis on the qualitative paradigm and specifically the methodology of action research. Action research occurs when the goal of the research is to address a specific problem within a specific setting (Merriam, 2009). In classroom action research the teacher becomes both the researcher and an active participant in the classroom (Burns, 2010). Burns states that action researchers use a set process of developing a research question, collecting data, analyzing the data, and making conclusions.

According to Dörnyei (2007) mixed methods research "involves different combinations of qualitative and quantitative research either at the data collection or at the analysis levels" (p.24). The mixed methods research approach allows researchers to collect a multitude of different types of data and therefore gives researchers a broader view from which to draw conclusions.

There are several reasons for why I choose to use a mixed methods research approach. First of all with a mixed methods approach I was able to use the strengths from both qualitative and quantitative research (Dörnyei, 2007). The qualitative data helped me understand when and how students were engaging in learning and the quantitative data helped me analyze and look at how many students were engaged and for how long they were engaged in learning. The second reason I chose a mixed methods approach is that the quantitative data is supported by all the qualitative data collected. Using the qualitative data of teacher observations, teacher reflections, and student reflections to explain the quantitative data will hopefully make the results of this research more understandable. Finally, I chose to use a mixed methods approach with the hope that I could create a study that is repeatable and that could achieve similar results. Dörnyei (2007) states that using mixed methods, both qualitative and quantitative approaches, helps increase the validly and reliability of a study.

**Qualitative Research**

Merriam (2009) describes qualitative researchers as "interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p.5). Qualitative researchers look closely at how people feel or think about a certain situation and try to capture their thoughts and

ideas as best as they can in order to report their findings. Qualitative research takes place in the natural setting of whatever it is that is being studied (Merriam, 2009). For this study, I wanted to examine which activities within the dramatic play center are engaging to the students in this study. My goal was to find ways to make the dramatic play center a more engaging learning place for students who often show disengaged learning behaviors at school. Using a qualitative research approach I was able to observe and reflect upon what I as a teacher am doing in the planning and implementation phase of the dramatic play center to help students be more engaged during this time, as well as think about what else I could do differently to help students be more engaged during this time.

Qualitative research allows for researchers to analyze what happens with a small number of participants with the hopes that others might learn from the experiences captured in the study (Merriam, 2009). In this study I analyzed the video-recordings of three kindergarten ELs learn more about what teachers can do to develop activities within the dramatic play center that might engage a student who might otherwise not be interested in the activity at hand.

This action research study meets the following of Creswell's (2009) characteristics of qualitative research:

- Natural setting - Data in this study was collected in the same environment where the participants experience the issue under study.

- Researcher as a key instrument - I (one of the students' teachers) was responsible for collecting data through examining my own anecdotal notes, video-recorded observations, and interviewing the participants.

- Multiple sources of data - Multiple sources of data were used including anecdotal notes, observations, and student interviews.

- Interpretive - Data is presented as my own interpretation of what had occurred during the study.

These characteristics of qualitative action research helped shaped the structure of this research study.

**Quantitative Research**

In addition to having used qualitative research methods, quantitative research methods were also used throughout the analysis of the data. Quantitative research focuses on numerical data and generalizing it across groups of people to explain a particular phenomenon (Mujs, 2010). For this study, I used quantitative research methods to support and make generalizations about the data that was collected through qualitative research methods.

This action research study meets the following of Creswell's (2009) characteristics of quantitative research (p. 155):

- All aspects of the study are carefully designed before data is collected.

- Objective answers are sought to clearly defined research questions.

- The research study can be replicated or repeated given its high reliability.

- Research study results can be used to generalize concepts more widely, predict future results, or investigate causal relationships.

Ensuring that this action research study meets these characteristics of quantitative research helps to ensure the reliability and validity of the study.

## Data Collection

**Participants**

The students in this study were kindergarten ELs from one of the classrooms in which I co-teach. During this study I focused on three kindergarten ELs who often display disengaged behaviors during whole group and many small group learning times.

**Student A.** Student A is a male Somali speaker. He is the oldest child in his family. He had preschool experience at the same school he is attending for kindergarten, but prior to that experience had been exposed to very little English. He relies heavily on watching other students to know what to do in the classroom. This reliance on other students to be able to follow directions often causes him to be disengaged in the task at hand.

**Student B.** Student B is a female Spanish speaker. She attended an English speaking preschool. In addition to her English preschool experience, she has three older brothers who have taught her a fair amount of English prior to starting kindergarten. Student B is a very social student. She is always very interested in what every other student is doing or saying in the classroom

**Student C.** Student C's family speaks both English and French at home. He has two older sisters who care and look after him a lot both at home and at school. Kindergarten is his first school experience. He loves art and makes friends easily. He asks lots of questions and sometimes gets so caught up in one minute detail that he loses track of the overall significance of what is going on.

**Setting**

The research site is an elementary school that serves around 700 students in preschool through grade five. The classroom is a mixture of students who are EL and native English speaking kindergarten students. The classroom is made up of 18 students of which six are ELs.

**Data Collection Process**

In order to establish credibility through triangulation, three methods of data collection were used to answer my research question: anecdotal data in the form of a daily research journal, observational records of video-recordings in the form of a specific checklist to monitor students' engagement behavior, and student interviews/surveys.

**Anecdotal Data**

I used a daily planning sheet as a place to record the planning, preparation, and the implementation of different engagement strategies in the dramatic play center during this study and document my rationale for decisions. The planning sheets I used (see Appendix A) were adapted from West and Cox (2004). The planning sheets gave me a place to capture my thinking on how I would connect the dramatic play to building literacy skills; it was also a place for me to start thinking about how students might engage in learning during the dramatic play center. These notes were written before and after the implementation of a new engagement strategy to the dramatic play center.

**Video-Recordings**

Students were video-recorded during their dramatic playtime. The video-recordings allowed me time to analyze student behaviors and signs of engagement during their dramatic play time. It also allowed me to continue my co-teaching responsibility of

working with small groups and individual students during this time. A specific checklist (see Appendix B) was utilized to monitor and record student behaviors and level of engagement. This checklist was adapted from Jones (2009) and Reeve (2012) in order to make the checklist focused on the specific participants and setting of this particular study.

**Teacher Observational Journal**

In the teacher observational journal, I documented my thoughts and feeling about how I setup the dramatic play center, as well as any questions, ideas, or concerns that had come to my attention. The purpose of written accounts of observations is for remembering and recording the specifics of an observation. Every researcher develops a technique that works for them (Merriam, 2009). However, Taylor and Bogdan (1984) offer the following tips for recording observations:

- Pay attention

- Focus on a specific person, interaction, or activity

- Listen for key words that will stand out later

- Concentrate on the first and last remarks in each conversation

- Mentally play back remarks and scenes during breaks in the talking or observing

I included written notes about what had been going well with the dramatic play center as well as things that may need modification. I used the journal to guide my future planning for the dramatic play center and reread it periodically to look for recurring trends in my thoughts.

**Student Interview**

I conducted a student interview with the three students in my study before the beginning of this study and after each round of dramatic play observations. McKay

(2010) states that interviews can fulfill various objectives, as in the case with these student interviews-gathering background information on participants and information about participants' opinions and attitudes about a given aspect of language learning. I asked students a variety of questions about their feelings regarding the dramatic play center and their engagement level at school. The interview questions (see Appendix C) were used as a guide for collecting students' feelings and thoughts. Rogers (2005) suggests that when conducting research interviews with young students it is best if students have an established relationship with the interviewer. Rogers (2005) also states it also helpful to give students an opportunity to express their opinions nonverbally. For this reason the interview questions are a mix of open response and a way for students to indicate their feelings using happy, straight, and sad faces. The main purpose and goal of the student interview was to find trends in what students found to be an engaging part of dramatic play and to use student feedback to create the next center.

<div align="center">**Procedure**</div>

This research occurred over a two month period. Research took place during the middle of the school year so that students were familiar with the procedures of school and had different opportunities to experience the dramatic play center. My first step, was to collect baseline data to establish what was happening during the dramatic play center before changing anything. I used a video-recording device to observe what types of engaged learning behaviors students were displaying during their time at the dramatic play center. I recorded what I saw using the Student Engagement Observational Checklist (see Appendix B). Also, at this time I completed the first student interview (see Appendix C) with the three EL students that I observed during this study.

The next step was the implementation of a strategic addition to the dramatic play center to help build student engagement. By reviewing information collected through student interviews, video tapes, my notes from the dramatic play planning sheets and the teaching observation journal I looked for themes and patterns for where I noticed students displaying and expressing high interest within the dramatic play center.

The final step was reporting on the finding from the implementation of a strategy aimed at helping build student engagement during the dramatic play center and planning further research cycles. I used a reflective practice to identify whether or not there was growth in the engaged learning behaviors that students displayed, looked for patterns in the anecdotal records and the teacher journal, and interpreted information from the Student Engagement Observational Checklist over the course of three different action research cycles. Each action research cycle focused on a different implementation strategy with the aim of increasing the amount of time students are displaying engaged learning behaviors while at the dramatic play center.

## Data Analysis

The results from of the Student Engagement Observational Checklist and the first round of student interviews provided a baseline of the students' feelings towards school and the dramatic play center as well as a baseline of data on the engaged learning behaviors students display while at the dramatic play center. Careful reflection on the Student Engagement Observational Checklist and the first round of student interviews were recorded in my teaching journal. I looked for trends in what types of activities were engaging to the students. I watched the videotapes and looked at my notes from the Student Engagement Observational Checklist to find patterns of when students were

displaying engaged learning behaviors. I identified when students were displaying

engaged learning behaviors. I created a chart to organize my anecdotal notes. The

students' names were listed on the vertical axis; the date and type of activity the student

was engaged within the dramatic play center appeared on the horizontal axis. Comments,

quotes, or displays of engaged learning behavior were written in post-it notes on the

chart. As I collected more and more data, I examined the entries for patterns and trends. I

used this information to plan my next implementation of a strategy aimed at increasing

students' display of engaged learning behavior during their time at the dramatic play

center.

## Verification of Data

As this is a mixed method research study with an emphasis on the qualitative

method much of the validity and reliability of this study is a direct result of the

techniques and thoughts of the researcher. However, there are ways to ensure it is a valid

study. According to Macintyre (2000), action research is valid when:

- There is a well-defined research question

- The procedure from beginning to end is defined

- Steps are taken to reduce bias

- The conclusions are derived from the research question, action plan, and data
  collected.

- There is triangulation of data.

The first two criteria were met through clearly stating the research question and the

reflection gained through the process of writing the literature review. The last two criteria

were met through using multiple sets of data including anecdotal notes, teacher journal,

Student Engagement Observational Checklist, and student interviews to observe and reflect upon what types of activities within the dramatic play center are engaging for the students in this study. Finally, triangulation of data was achieved through making sure data was collected from different areas including anecdotal data in the form of teaching observation journal entries and dramatic play planning sheets, student interviews, and video recordings of students at the dramatic play center.

A disadvantage of classroom action research studies is that the researcher is also the teacher. This dual role sometimes interferes with the researcher being completely objective. Simply being aware of this fact helped me take steps to ensure that despite being an active participant in the study, I approached my findings with objectivity. Also, the video recordings helped me keep an objective mind frame by allowing me to watch what was happening during the dramatic play center time during a time where I would not be distracted by teaching and with whatever else was going on in the classroom at this time. The video tapes also allowed me to view sessions of students at the dramatic play center multiple times to confirm what I observed and to give me an opportunity to observe things I may not have seen the first time. In addition, having two of my EL colleagues independently score the video-recordings also helped me keep an objective mind frame throughout the study.

## Ethics

Throughout this research study great care was taken to ensure the utmost confidentially for the participants. First of all, written permission of informed consent was obtained from each of the participants' legal guardians. Copies in families' home language were provided to families that wanted the information in their home language as

well. An interpreter was also made available if the family had questions. Families were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and were given information on how to do that. In addition to giving written permission of informed consent to participate in the study, participants' legal guardians also signed video tape permission forms. Furthermore, random numbers were assigned to each student participant to help ensure student privacy. These numbers were used in both field notes and the research report instead of the participants' names. Third, all videotapes were stored in a locked cabinet in my school office. After this research project was completed all videotapes were destroyed. Fourth, prior to any research taking place, the study was reviewed by Hamline University's human subject review committee. As part of this process I also obtained the permission of my school district and my co-teaching partner to conduct this research.

<div align="center">**Conclusion**</div>

Chapter Three discussed the methodology of action research on the dramatic play center in order to find activities within the center that that will help facilitate EL kindergarten students' engagement level. The chapter began with a description of the mixed method approach of action research. Then, the research participants and site were described. This was followed by the presentation of information on the data collection process. Then, the procedure of the study was discussed. After that, how the data will be analyzed and validated was explained. Finally, this chapter concluded by discussing the ethics of this research in relation to using human subjects. In the next chapter, the results of the study will be presented.

# CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The results of the study are presented in this chapter. During this study I observed what three different kindergarten ELs found engaging during their time at the dramatic play center. Over the course of three weeks I video-recorded the students while they were at the dramatic play center and then analyzed their behavior for signs of engaged learning. As a participant observer in this action research study I would alter the setup of the dramatic play center based on the data I collected from the previous week by making the activities more connected to the weekly learning and theme in the classroom by having the students become more involved in making props. All this was done in order to answer my research question: *To what extent do different activities within the dramatic play center engage ELs?*

## Week One

### Dramatic Play Setup

During the first week of this study students were given a store-bought finger puppet kit to play with while they were at the dramatic play center. The finger puppets included characters such as a king, queen, prince, princess, page, wizard, magician, and some animals. There was also a small puppet show theater building that students could use while playing with the finger puppets. The puppets were not related to any particular theme the students were studying.

**Video-Recording Data**

The three participants of this study were each recorded once while they were at the dramatic play center using the finger puppets. Each child was recorded for roughly 15 minutes which is the average time the students spend at an individual activity center during this point of the school year. The video recordings allowed me to go back and analyze the behaviors of the three student participants for signs of engaged learning. I utilized a specific checklist (see Appendix B) to monitor and record student behaviors and levels of engagement. This checklist was adapted from Jones (2009) and Reeve (2012) in order to make the checklist focused on the specific participants and setting of this particular study. The checklist looks at thirteen specific behaviors that are signs of engaged learning. Figure 4.1 shows a summary of my findings.

During week one the three students in the study showed different levels of engaged learning behaviors. Student B displayed the most engaged learning behaviors. Student B displayed eleven out of the thirteen different engaged learning behaviors either all or some of the time. Student A displayed a slightly less engaged learning behavior pattern in comparison to Student B. Student A displayed ten out of the thirteen different engaged learning behaviors either all or some of the time. During week one Student C showed the least amount of engaged learning behaviors while at the dramatic play center. Student C displayed eight out of the thirteen different engaged learning behaviors either all or some of the time. See Table 1 for a summary of how many times each student was engaged either all or some of the time.

Although the three students had different levels of engaged behaviors during week 1 of the study, all three students had similar patterns for what types of engaged

learning behavior were more or less frequently displayed. For example, the checklist used

in this study to observe engaged learning behavior is broken down into five different

categories of engaged learning behaviors: positive body language, consistent focus,

verbal participation, student confidence, and active participation in team-based work. All

three students displayed the least frequent engaged learning behaviors that fall under the

categories of consistent focus and verbal participation. Student confidence was another

area that all three students showed lower levels of engaged learning behaviors. Student A

and Student C showed minimal time engaged in the area of student confidence. Student B

was observed to show engaged learning behaviors in this area some of the time. Positive

body language was the area that all three students showed the most engaged learning

behaviors followed by active participation in team-based work.

| | All the time | Some of the time | Minimal/None of the time |
|---|---|---|---|
| Positive body language. | | | |
| Students exhibit body postures that indicate listening and attention to other students and the presence of task-facilitating emotions (e.g., interest, curiosity, and enthusiasm). | Student A-week 1 Student A-week 2 Student A-week 3<br><br>Student B-week 2 Student B-week 3<br><br>Student C-week 3 | Student B-week 1<br><br><br>Student C-week 1 Student C-week 2 | |
| Eye Contact on props at the dramatic play center | Student A-week 1 Student A-week 2 Student A-week 3<br><br>Student B-week 1 Student B-week 2 Student B-week 3<br><br>Student C-week 2 Student C-week 3 | Student C-week 1 | |
| Props are used in a way that is engaged with learning | Student A-week 3 Student B-week 2 | Student A-week 1 Student A-week 2 Student B-week 1 | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Student B-week 3 Student C-week 3 | Student C-week 1 Student C-week 2 | |
| Consistent focus. | | | |
| Student is focused on the learning experience | Student A-week 1 Student A-week 3  Student B-week 1 Student B-week 2 Student B-week 3  Student C-week 3 | Student A-week 2    Student C-week 1 Student C-week 2 | |
| Attention doesn't waiver because of lack of interest of how to proceed, frustration, or some outside distraction? | Student A-week 3 | Student A-week 1 Student A-week 2  Student B-week 1 Student B-week 2 Student B-week 3  Student C-week 3 | Student C-week 1 Student C-week 2 |
| Student seeks a conceptual understanding rather than surface knowledge. | Student A-week3  Student B-week 2 Student B-week 3 | Student A-week 2    Student C-week 2 Student C-week 3 | Student A-week 1  Student B-week 1   Student C-week 1 |
| Verbal participation. | | | |
| Students express thoughtful ideas and answers.  Student ask questions that are relevant or appropriate to learning. | Student A-week 3  Student B-week 2 Student B-week 3  Student C-week 3 | Student A-week 2    Student C-week 2 | Student A-week 1  Student B -week 1  Student C-week 1 |
| Student participation is not passive; it involves sharing opinions and reflecting on complex problems. | Student A-week 3  Student B-week 1 Student B-week 2 Student B-week 3  Student C –week 3 | Student A-week 1 Student A-week 2    Student C-week 1 Student C-week 2 | |
| Use of self-regulatory strategies (e.g., planning). | Student A-week 2 Student A-week 3 | Student A-week 1 | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Student B-week 1<br>Student B-week 2<br>Student B-week3 | Student C-week 1<br>Student C-week 2<br>Student C-week 3 | |
| Student confidence. | | | |
| Students exhibit confidence to initiate and complete a task with limited coaching or approval-seeking. | Student A-week 2<br>Student A-week 3<br><br>Student B-week 2<br>Student B-week 3 | Student A-week 1<br><br><br>Student B-week 1<br><br><br>Student C-week 1<br>Student C-week 2<br>Student C-week 3 | |
| Student can actively participate in team-based work. | | Student A-week 2<br>Student A-week 3<br><br>Student B-week 1<br>Student B-week 2<br>Student B-week 3<br><br>Student C-week 3 | Student A-week 1<br><br><br><br><br><br><br>Student C-week 1<br>Student C-week 2 |
| Active participate in team-based work. | | | |
| Students exhibit interest, enthusiasm. | Student A-week 2<br>Student A-week 3<br><br>Student B-week 2<br>Student B-week 3<br><br>Student C-week 3 | Student A-week 1<br><br><br>Student B-week 1<br><br><br>Student C-week 2 | Student C-week 1 |
| Student uses positive humor. | Student A-week 1<br>Student A-week 2<br><br>Student B-week 1<br>Student B -week 2<br><br>Student C-week 1<br>Student C-week 2<br>Student C-week 3 | Student A-week 3<br><br><br>Student B-week 3 | |

*Figure 4.1.* Student engagement levels.

Table 1

*Number of times students were either engaged all or some of the time.*

| Student and week | Number of engaged behaviors rated all or some of the time (0-13) |
|---|---|
| Student A-week 1 | 10 |
| Student B-week 1 | 11 |
| Student C-week 1 | 8 |
| | |
| Student A-week 2 | 13 |
| Student B-week 2 | 13 |
| Student C-week 2 | 11 |
| | |
| Student A-week 3 | 13 |
| Student B-week 3 | 13 |
| Student C-week 3 | 13 |

**Student Interview**

After the first week of the study I interviewed each of the three students using interview questions (see Appendix C) as a guide for collecting students' feelings and thoughts. Figure 4.2 shows the results of the student interviews.

| | ☺ | ☺ (neutral) | ☹ |
|---|---|---|---|
| How do you feel about kindergarten? | Student A -week 1<br>Student A-week 2<br>Student A-week 3<br>Student B-week 1<br>Student B-week 2<br>Student B-week 3<br>Student C-week 1<br>Student C-week 2<br>Student C-week 3 | | |
| How do you feel when you're at the dramatic play center? | Student A-week 1<br>Student A-week 2<br>Student A-week 3<br>Student B-week 1<br>Student B-week 2<br>Student B-week 3<br>Student C-week 3 | Student C-week 2 | Student C-week 1 |

*Figure 4.2.* Student interview results.

Overall during week one of the study all three students reported that they had positive feelings towards kindergarten. When asked why they felt the way they did about the dramatic play center both Student A and Student B reported that the dramatic play center was fun. Student C reported that he would rather be at the art station.

There seems to be a correlation in data when comparing the student interview results to the results from the engaged learning behavior checklist. During week one of the study Student A and Student B both displayed higher levels of engaged learning behaviors and they also reported more positive feelings about the dramatic play center during week one in comparison to Student C who displayed lower levels of engaged learning behaviors and reported a less positive feeling about the dramatic play center.

**Teacher Observational Journal**

My teacher observational journal revealed a trend in my thinking and reflections on the week. During this first week of the study I noted in my observational journal that I saw the three students excited and engaged to use new props during their time in the dramatic play center, but also noted that the students spent most of their time at the dramatic play center exploring and describing the new props to one another. My teaching observational journal showed that although I was pleased the students were engaged with the props, I wanted to try to find a way for them to be more engaged with telling a story.

Upon reflection I noted that the setup of the dramatic play station didn't allow students for a lot of in-depth verbal participation. One day that week in my teacher observational journal I wrote, "I need to find a way to setup the dramatic play center to engage students in a storyline". This need to get students more involved with telling the

story is what motivated me to make some changes to the setup of the dramatic play center for week two of this study.

## Week Two

### Dramatic Play Setup

Upon reflection from week one I wanted to find a way to setup the dramatic play station to give students more of an opportunity to create and engage with a storyline to see if this might perhaps help students display more engaged learning behaviors in the areas of consistent focus and verbal participation. This week I decided to setup the dramatic play station around the theme of Curious George. The students had been reading Curious George books during their literacy block and had multiple opportunities to listen to Curious George books. This week students were given store-bought Curious George paper dolls to use while they were at the dramatic play center.

### Video-Recording Data

Again the three students were each video-recorded while they were at the dramatic play station this week. Again, I utilized a specific checklist (see Appendix B) to monitor and record student behaviors and level of engagement. Figure 4.1 shows a summary of my findings pertaining to engaged learning behaviors.

Similar to week one of the study, during week two the three students displayed different levels of engaged learning while at the dramatic play center. Again, Student B displayed the most engaged learning behaviors. Student B displayed all of the thirteen learning behaviors either all or some of the time eleven of which were displayed all the time. Student A also displayed all of the thirteen engaged learning behaviors either all or some of the time with seven of them being displayed all the time. In a similar way to

week one of the study, Student C displayed the least amount of engaged learning

behaviors. Student C displayed eleven of the thirteen engaged learning behaviors all or

some of the time with two of them being displayed all the time.

Although all three students again displayed different levels of engaged learning

behaviors, all students displayed more engaged learning behaviors during week two as

compared to week one of the study. When comparing how many engaged learning

behaviors were observed all or some of the time all students showed a positive growth

from week one to week two. Although during week one and week two of the study

Student C displayed the least amount of engaged learning behavior, Student C showed

the most amount of growth in engaged learning from week one to week two of the study.

For example, during week one Student C displayed eight of the thirteen engaged learning

behaviors either all or some of the time. However, during week two Student C displayed

eleven of the thirteen engaged learning behaviors all or some of the time. This equates to

a 37.5% growth in engagement from week one to week two. In comparison, Student A

made a 30% percent growth in engagement and Student B made an 18% growth in

engagement from week one to week two.

During week two of the study there was strong growth across all categories of

engaged learning behaviors for all three students. However, there were two particular

standout categories of growth in the categories of consistent focus and verbal

participation. During week one of the study it was noticed that all three students had the

lowest levels of engaged learning behaviors that fell under the category of consistent

focus and verbal participation. For example, under the category of consistent focus during

week one it was observed that all three students minimally or none of the time sought a

conceptual understanding rather than surface knowledge. During week one of the study all three students spent almost all of their time at the dramatic play center looking and studying the store-bought finger puppets and making basic comments about the finger puppet appearances. However, during week two students began to tell stories using the Curious George paper dolls.

In a similar manner all three students showed much more engaged learning behaviors during week two of the study in the area of verbal participation. For example, during week one of the study all three students were observed minimally or none of the time expressing thoughtful ideas and answers. It was noted that during week one that all three students didn't use a lot of oral language when playing with the store-bought finger puppets and when they did it was more along the lines of commenting on what the finger puppet was instead of making up a story. However, during week two students starting retelling and making up their own Curious George stories. These conversations that came out of retelling and making up stories took thoughtful ideas to create. For example, Student B began asking the girl she was playing with about what problem Curious George could have while he was wearing the cook's outfit.

**Student Interview**

After the second week of the study I interviewed each of the three students using interview questions (see Appendix C) as a guide for collecting students' feelings and thoughts. Figure 4.2 shows the results of the student interviews.

Again, all three students reported that they had positive feelings towards kindergarten. All three students also reported that they enjoyed playing with the Curious George paper dolls. However, Student C expressed that he would rather be at the art

center than playing with the Curious George paper dolls. Student C also expressed his opinion that he thought dolls were for girls. Student C was the only student who didn't respond with a big smiley face when asked, "How do you feel when you're at the dramatic play center?" Instead Student C responded with a flat line face to describe how he felt when he was at the dramatic play center. Student C's increased happiness level while at the dramatic play center correlates to the increase in observed engaged learning behaviors during week two.

**Teacher Observational Journal**

During week two of the study my teacher observational journal showed some new trends in my thinking. Although all the students in the study initially spent a lot of time looking at and describing all the different outfits that the Curious George paper doll could wear I noted that I saw a difference in how Student A and Student B were using the props at times. Instead of always just talking about the different outfits the Curious George paper doll could put on, I noted that Student A and Student B started talking about and retelling some of the stories they had heard in class that corresponded to the outfits they saw. Student C's conversation stayed more to describing and commenting on the different outfits that the Curious George paper doll could wear.

In my teacher observational journal this week I noted that my goal for next week would be to see how I could set up the dramatic play center in a way that would encourage Student A and Student B to build upon the stories they were starting to retell and create while playing with the Curious George paper doll and to encourage Student C to engage in conversation beyond describing the different outfits for the Curious George paper doll. My thoughts were that perhaps if students were more involved with making

additional paper dolls and props that went along with a particular story the students

would be more engaged in the center.

## Week Three

**Dramatic Play Setup**

Upon reflection from week two I wanted to see if students were to become more

engaged if they were involved with creating the props and additional characters to use at

the dramatic play center. Student A and Student B were already beginning to use the

different paper doll outfits for Curious George to spark their own attempts to retell some

of the Curious George stories they had heard in class.  In order to help students continue

to build upon being engaged with their own story retellings I had the students use their

time in the art station to either make additional paper dolls characters such as the Man

With the Yellow Hat or other characters from the book or paint a setting for the

characters such as a store or school.

**Video-Recording Data**

Again the three students were each video-recorded while they were at the

dramatic play station this week. Again, I utilized a specific checklist (see Appendix B) to

monitor and record student behaviors and level of engagement. Figure 4.1 shows a

summary of my findings while analyzing the video-recordings from week three of the

study.

During week three of the study the three students showed different levels of

engaged learning while at the dramatic play center. However, in comparison to weeks

one and two of the study all three students had more similar levels of engaged learning

behaviors during week three. During week three of the study Student A and Student B

had similar levels of engaged learning behavior as they had during week two of the study. However, Student C showed a big jump in engaged learning behavior from week two to week three. During week two of the study Student C displayed two of the thirteen engaged learning behaviors all of the time. During week three of the In comparison to Student A who showed eleven of the thirteen engaged learning behaviors all of the time during week three of the study and Student B who displayed ten of the engaged learning behaviors all of the time during week three. Student C displayed seven of the thirteen engaged learning behaviors all of the time. It is apparent that the three students displayed different levels of engaged learning, but during week three of the study there was the least amount of discrepancy in the different levels of displayed engaged learning behaviors.

**Student Interview**

After the third week of the study I interviewed each of the three students using interview questions (see Appendix C) as a guide for collecting students' feelings and thoughts. Figure 4.2 shows the results of the student interviews from week two.

Again, all three students reported that they had positive feelings towards kindergarten. All three students also reported that they enjoyed playing with the Curious George paper dolls and liked having had an opportunity to make a prop to interact with while at the dramatic play center.

**Teacher Observational Journal**

During week three of the study my teacher observational journal showed some new trends in my thinking and observations. I noticed that all three of the students were using the props they created to go more in-depth with retelling a story. For example,

Student B made a painting of a school for a background of a setting. When Student B was at the dramatic play center she focused on retelling the story of *Curious George Goes to School*. Instead of spending her time at the dramatic play center retelling bits and pieces from different Curious George stories that she had heard, Student B spent the vast majority of her time at the dramatic play center retelling one story, but going more in-depth with what was going on in the story.

Throughout the previous two weeks Student C showed the least engaged behaviors while at the dramatic play center. This week Student C had spent time making additional paper dolls at the art center to go along with the story *Curious George Goes to the Hospital*. While Student C was at the dramatic play center his behavior showed that he was much more engaged with the props that he created and henceforth helped him be much more engaged with the overall learning going on at the dramatic play center. Student A also seemed more engaged with the props that he created and spent more time telling one story rather than simply describing and commenting on the different outfits the Curious George paper dolls could wear.

Although during week three of the study the three students seemed to be continuing to be more and more engaged there was one area that both Student A and Student B's engagement waivered. In weeks one and two of the study both Student A and Student B used positive humor all of the time. However, during week three of the study Student A and Student B were observed using positive humor only some of the time. This rating occurred as Student A and Student B were at the dramatic play center together and both made a few teasing comments to a student about the way their self-made props appeared.

**Conclusion**

The results of the data collected: anecdotal notes, video-recordings, student surveys, and teacher observational journal, showed some different trends. First of all it highlighted that students have different levels of engagement with the same activity. For example, throughout the study it appeared that Student B seemed to display the most engaged learning behavior while Student C displayed the least engaged learning behavior and Student A was somewhere in the middle.

The results also showed that individual students have different levels of engaged learning with different activities on different days. For example, during week one of the study Student C was engaged all or some of the time in eight out of the thirteen categories of engaged learning. However, during week three of the study Student C was engaged all or some of the time in thirteen out of thirteen categories of engaged learning.

The data indicated that students are more engaged with learning at the dramatic play center when the theme is connected to what the students have been reading or leaning about in the classroom. However, the results also showed the students can wavered in the different categories of engaged learning behaviors depending on the day and activity. For example both Student A and Student B displayed positive use of humor all of the time during week one and week two of the study. However, an argument during their time at the dramatic play center during week three showed that they were using positive humor only some of the time that particular day.

In this chapter I presented the results of my data collection. In Chapter Five I will discuss my major findings, their implication, and suggestions for further research.

**CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS**

As a teacher of kindergarten ELs I have noticed that not all my students meet the end of the year literacy benchmarks that the district has in place. One of my hypotheses for why some of these students do not meet this benchmark is because they have not yet attained enough oral language proficiency in English to read at the level the district has set as the benchmark. One of the activities within the classroom that give students an opportunity to develop their English oral language skills is the dramatic play center. For this study I wanted to see how I as a teacher could make the dramatic play center a place that provided students with rich opportunities to work on developing their English oral language.

In this research project I set out to answer the question: *To what extent do different activities within the dramatic play center engage ELs?* Research has shown that students learn the most when they are engaged in learning (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Jensen, 2005; Woolfolk, 2001). For this reason I began to look at student engagement at the dramatic play center. I figured if I could observe students being highly engaged at the dramatic play center then I could be more confident that their time at the dramatic play center was helping them develop their oral language proficiency and have a better understanding of how I could setup the dramatic play center to be a rich learning experience for students. In this chapter I will discuss the major findings of this study, limitations of the study, implications for teachers, and suggestions for further research.

**Major Findings**

The results of the data collected suggest that different activities within the dramatic play center have different levels of engagement for ELs. First of all, the data suggests that activities within the dramatic play center that are connected to a theme that the students have been studying are more engaging to ELs. This finding supports the research done by Huber (2000). Huber found that having a dramatic play center be a familiar setting to the students creates comfort for the students because they know how to act. During the first week of the study students were given store-bought finger puppets. These puppets were not connected to any theme the students had been studying. When looking at the results of my data this was the week that all three students showed the least amount of engaged learning behaviors. The second week of the study students were given Curious George paper dolls to use while at the dramatic play center. Prior to using the paper dolls the students had been reading many Curious George books. This week all three students were more engaged than they had been during the first week of the study. This data suggests that students are more engaged when the dramatic play center is connected to a theme they have been studying, but it may also suggest that the students in this study were more engaged when playing with paper dolls as compared to finger puppets.

Secondly, the data also suggests that setting up a dramatic play center in which students have made some of their own props is more engaging to ELs compared to a dramatic play center where the props are provided for the students. This finding supports the research of Chakraborty and Stone (2009). Chakraborty and Stone found that having students engage with making props for the dramatic play center gives students an

opportunity to start thinking and planning for how they might use these props to create or recreate a story. In week three of the study, the students made some of their own Curious George paper dolls and other props. This was by far the most engaging week for all three students at the dramatic play center.

The third major finding that the results suggested that the engagement level of individual students can vary from student to student. For example, during week one the three students in the study showed different levels of engaged learning behaviors. Student B displayed the most engaged learning behaviors. Student B displayed eleven out of the thirteen different engaged learning behaviors either all or some of the time.  To contrast during week one Student C showed the least amount of engaged learning behaviors while at the dramatic play center. Student C displayed eight out of the thirteen different engaged learning behaviors either all or some of the time. Student C reported that he would rather be at the art center. This comment and the data I collected in this study made me think about how there may not be one activity that is more engaging to all students. Different students will find different activities engaging. Therefore a conclusion of this study is that the dramatic play center could be an effective activity for developing oral language proficiency for EL kindergarteners because the dramatic play center lends itself to accommodate different students' learning styles and interests. This study also found that by allowing students to create their own props, the dramatic play center became more engaging to more students. The making of the props became an anticipatory set for the students.  The students in this study either made a paper doll or painted a setting backdrop.  This allowed the students to practice and think more deeply about what language they were to use in the dramatic play center.

The data also suggest that the engagement level of students may vary from day to day and may waver at times. For example, during the third week of the study Student A and Student B showed less engaged learning behavior when they were teasing other students about how their self-made prop turned out. These findings made me think about how there are many factors that go into what makes an activity engaging. When looking at how to make the dramatic play center engaging for a wide range of students, teachers have to think about what interest their students, how to have students make simple props, and how to make a dramatic play center revolve around a theme the students are already familiar with.

## Limitations

As with any study there were limitations to my research. First of all, my study looked at a small pool of students. Due to time and scope of study as well as making sure I was able to attain parental permission for all students in the study I was only able to observe three ELs for this study. This limited my study because I was only able to see what activities three ELs found engaging while at the dramatic play center. Perhaps if I had more students or even different students in the study I may have found that these other students found the activities within the dramatic play center to be more or less engaging. For example, another extension for this research would be to compare if my findings hold true for students whose first language is English.

A second limitation my study had was a time constraint. I was only able to look at the engagement levels of ELs with three different activities within the dramatic play center. If I had more time I would have done more rounds of observing different activities within the dramatic play center to see if I could get further repeating data and results.

A third limitation of my study is the bias that was brought in to the data and the results from my role as both teacher and researcher. During data collection and analysis I strived to be unbiased, but I know that as a teacher-participant in this study I was not a completely neutral party (Brice Heath, 1986). When collecting and analyzing my data I brought with me months worth of background knowledge and experiences with these students that wasn't part of this particular study. I wouldn't and couldn't change anything about my role for the study, because that how it was setup. Yet, I think it is important to acknowledge that given time and scope constraints I was not able to involve another researcher who would have been able to compare and perhaps validate my results.

## Implications

This study cannot prove the extent to which different activities within the dramatic play center have an effect on student engagement. The data does suggest that different activities within the dramatic play center can be more or less engaging to ELs. The results of the data collected: anecdotal notes, video-recordings, student surveys, and teacher observational journal show that different activities within the dramatic play center have different levels of engagement for different ELs. The data shows that the same activity at the dramatic play center can be more engaging to some students than others. For example Student A and Student B really seemed to enjoy playing with the Curious George paper dolls, however Student C commented that he didn't really enjoy playing with the Curious George paper doll because he thought dolls were for girls.  Therefore, in order to meet the needs of all students there needs to be a variety of activities within the dramatic play center and the teacher needs to continually monitor to see when, how often, and how the activities needs to change.

The data also showed that through careful observation and reflection teachers can tailor the setup of the dramatic play center to be more engaging to students. The video-recordings, anecdotal notes, and teacher observational journal revealed that some of the activities in the dramatic play center lend themselves to be more or less easily to the different forms of positive engagement. For example, I found the data showed that the dramatic play center I had setup during week one of the study didn't lend itself towards letting the students exhibit a lot of verbal participation by the nature of how it was setup. This finding supports the research findings of Logue and Detour (2011). Logue and Detour found that children's pretend play becomes more complex when teachers support play through setup. Reflecting on what I could do to make the dramatic play center more engaging on a verbal participation level appeared to make the dramatic play center more engaging to students in the following weeks of the study.

## Further Research

This study provided me with a great opportunity to reflect upon what my ELs find engaging at the dramatic play center. Much more research needs to be done to have a better understanding of to what extent different activities within the dramatic play center have on student engagement. For example, I think it would be interesting to do more research to see if the findings of my study would hold true with other ELs as well as with non-ELs. I also would like to look more closely at what is the best role of the dramatic play center within the classroom setting. For example, I wonder if the dramatic play center is best used as an independent practice time or more of a place to introduce new language or concepts. I would also like to do more research to see if there is a certain type of prop that is more engaging for students to make for the dramatic play center.

## Conclusions

This study found that the dramatic play center is an effective activity for developing oral language proficiency for EL kindergarteners because the dramatic play center lends itself to accommodate different students' learning styles and interests. This study also found that by allowing students to create their own props, it increases the variety and appeal to a wide range of students. In order to meet the needs of all students there needs to be a variety of activities within the dramatic play center and the teacher needs to continually monitor to see when, how often, and how the activities needs to change.

As a result of the conclusions of this study I plan to be more deliberate in how I setup the dramatic play center. I will pay closer attention to what different students find engaging and try to plan a variety of activities within the dramatic play center that will make the center engaging to a wide range of students who may have different interests. I will also look for more opportunities for students to be involved in making props for the dramatic play center.

I believe that the findings presented in this study are useful for kindergarten classroom teachers and teachers of ELs. Although not all kindergarten classroom teachers work with ELs, there are most likely other students who may be disengaged while at the dramatic play center who could benefit from teachers implementing the findings of this study. In order for teachers to be able to implement the findings of this study they need to be able to hear about my study. I plan to share my findings in three ways. First, I plan to share my findings with the team of kindergarten classroom teachers who I work with at my school. During the school year we meet every other week for a literacy professional

learning community. I plan to share my findings with them at one of our first meetings during this upcoming school year. Secondly, I plan to share my findings with my team of EL teachers at my school. Finally, my capstone project will be catalogued in Hamline's Bush library Digital Commons, a searchable electronic repository.

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Appendix A

Dramatic Play Planning Sheets

Dramatic Play Planning Sheets

Date:_____

Dramatic Play Theme:_____

**Props: Student made vs. teacher/store bought**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Props are store bought or teacher constructed. Students had some opportunity to make props. | Students had an opportunity to make some of the props. However, most of the props are made by the teacher or are store bought. | Students made most of the props. Some props may be store bought or teacher made. | Students made all of the props. |

**Literacy Connection: Story Dramatization**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Dramatic play center theme has no connection to a story recently read or discussed with class. | The theme of the dramatic play center has a loose connection to a recently read or discussed story. For example, some of the props may be characters or objects from a story that the class recently read. | The theme of the dramatic play center is very much connected to a recently read or discussed story. For example, all the props are either characters or objects from a recently read story or allow the students to reenact the story. |

What parts of this dramatic play center have students found engaging?: _____

_____

_____

What if anything needs to be changed?_____

_____

_____


Additional thoughts/ideas/reflections:_____

_____

_____

Appendix B

Student Engagement Observational Checklist

Student Name:_____
Date: _____
Time of Observation: _____

| Student Engagement Characteristic | Frequency of Desired Engaged Behavior (All the time, Some of the time, Non) | Observed Behaviors |
|---|---|---|
| **Positive body language.** | | |
| Students exhibit body postures that indicate listening and attention to other students and the presence of task-facilitating emotions (e.g., interest, curiosity, and enthusiasm). | ○ All the time<br><br>○ Some of the time<br><br>○ Minimal/None of the time | |
| Eye Contact on props at the dramatic play center | ○ All the time<br><br>○ Some of the time<br><br>○ Minimal/None of the time | |
| Props are used in a way that is engaged with learning | ○ All the time<br><br>○ Some of the time<br><br>○ Minimal/None of the time | |
| **Consistent focus.** | | |
| Student is focused on the learning experience | ○ All the time<br><br>○ Some of the time<br><br>○ Minimal/None of the time | |
| Attention doesn't waiver because of lack of interest of how to proceed, | ○ All the time<br><br>○ Some of the time<br><br>○ Minimal/None of | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| frustration, or some outside distraction? | the time | |
| Student seeks a conceptual understanding rather than surface knowledge. | o All the time<br><br>o Some of the time<br><br>o Minimal/None of the time | |
| **Verbal participation.** | | |
| Students express thoughtful ideas and answers. | o All the time<br><br>o Some of the time<br><br>o Minimal/None of the time | |
| Student ask questions that are relevant or appropriate to learning. | o All the time<br><br>o Some of the time<br><br>o Minimal/None of the time | |
| Student participation is not passive; it involves sharing opinions and reflecting on complex problems. | o All the time<br><br>o Some of the time<br><br>o Minimal/None of the time | |
| Use of self-regulatory strategies (e.g., planning). | o All the time<br><br>o Some of the time<br><br>o Minimal/None of the time | |
| **Student confidence.** | | |
| Students exhibit confidence to initiate and complete a task with limited coaching or approval-seeking. | o All the time<br><br>o Some of the time<br><br>o Minimal/None of the time | |
| Student can actively participate in team-based work. | o All the time<br><br>o Some of the time<br><br>o Minimal/None of the time | |

| **Active participate in team-based work.** | | |
|---|---|---|
| Students exhibit interest, enthusiasm. | o  All the time<br><br>o  Some of the time<br><br>O  Minimal/None of the time | |
| Student uses positive humor. | o  All the time<br><br>o  Some of the time<br><br>o  Minimal/None of the time | |

Appendix C

Student Interview

1. How do you feel about kindergarten?



2. What do you like about kindergarten?

3. How do you feel when you're at the dramatic play center? Why?



4. What do you like about the dramatic play center?